John B. Breaux (D)

Of Crowley — Elected 1986, 2nd term

Biographical Information

Born: March 1, 1944, Crowley, La.
Education: U. of Southwestern Louisiana, B.A. 1964; Louisiana State U., J.D. 1967.
Occupation: Lawyer.
Family: Wife, Lois Daigle; four children.
Religion: Roman Catholic.
Political Career: U.S. House, 1972-87.
Capitol Office: 516 Hart Bldg. 20510; 224-4623.

Committees

Special Aging

Commerce, Science & Transportation
Aviation; Communications; Consumer Affairs, Foreign Commerce & Tourism (ranking); Oceans & Fisheries; Surface Transportation & Merchant Marine

Finance
International Trade; Social Security & Family Policy (ranking); Taxation & IRS Oversight

Chief Deputy Whip



In Washington: With the retirement of Democratic Sen. J. Bennett Johnston in 1996, Breaux became Louisiana's senior senator. And with Republican Mike Foster in the governor's office, Breaux also is now the leading voice for Democrats in his state.

With this new status, look for Breaux to do even more of what he has done during a quarter-century in politics — work to move his party to the center of the ideological spectrum and forge ties with Republicans willing to help him advance the interests of constituents and home-state businesses.

Breaux is the sort who cannot get enough of politics, whether fundraising, strategizing or legislating. True to the Cajun tradition, "laissez les bons temps roulez," he makes it seem great fun.

He has as much deal-making talent as anyone in the Senate, and a voting record that puts him just inside the Democratic mainstream. These qualities might seem to qualify him for an elected spot in the party leadership, and indeed, when Democratic Whip Wendell H. Ford of Kentucky announced retirement plans in early 1997, Breaux was among the mentioned possible successors. However, certain aspects of Breaux's and his state's political image might be a tough sell to Democrats nationally: He is a stalwart backer of the oil industry, an unapologetic protégé of controversial former Gov. Edwin W. Edwards and, like Edwards, a roguish charmer, known for once quipping that while his vote could not be bought, "it can be rented."

Although cast into the Senate minority by the 1994 GOP surge, Breaux has a hawk's eyes for legislative opportunity, and that kept him near the center of the action in the 104th Congress. He allied himself with Democratic leaders in seeking changes to the welfare system, Medicaid and the government's job-training programs. But he also joined forces with Rhode Island Republican John H. Chafee during the debate over how to balance the federal budget. Breaux and Chafee tried to find common ground acceptable to both President Clinton and congressional Republicans.

The partnership with Chafee was not a new one. The two had worked together for years, collaborating, for instance, on health care in the 103rd Congress, when the GOP minority frustrated Clinton's overhaul efforts.

As the 104th Congress slogged through difficult budget negotiations with the White House in 1995, Breaux and Chafee grew frustrated with the pace of progress and decided to seek a consensus in the center of the political spectrum. They quickly found six senators from each side of the aisle willing to work toward a compromise, and the group's ranks eventually swelled to 21.

They released their bipartisan balanced-budget plan just before Christmas. The package would have balanced the budget in seven years by achieving $661 billion in savings. It included a tax cut of about $130 billion, Medicare savings of some $154 billion, Medicaid savings of about $62 billion and changes in the welfare system that would have netted about $58 billion in savings. For the most part, the Chafee-Breaux plan split the difference between Clinton's plan and the one offered by congressional Republicans.

Their budget outline also called for a downward adjustment in the Consumer Price Index (CPI), the measure of inflation used to determine cost-of-living adjustments for government programs such as Social Security. A lowering of the CPI would decrease benefits under such programs and increase taxes by slowing the indexing process. The Chafee-Breaux plan would have achieved about $110 billion in savings by lowering the CPI, far more than either the Clinton or GOP plans would have achieved.

Although Clinton and the GOP Congress ultimately failed to work out a long-term budget plan, many of the ideas in the Breaux-Chafee framework continued to surface as the 105th Congress renewed efforts to craft a long-term budget-balancing strategy.

Similarly, Breaux had an impact on the health care debate. The centrist proposal he and Chafee crafted in the 103rd included language that would have prohibited health insurers from refusing

coverage or renewal of coverage because of pre-existing medical conditions. Although the broader plan fell by the wayside in the 103rd, the narrow language about pre-existing conditions resurfaced as the foundation of a more modest plan to overhaul the health insurance market. Clinton eventually signed that measure into law.

Because the GOP majority recognizes that Breaux's support can spell the difference between defeat and victory for their proposals, few Democrats can match his ability to get their attention. Early in the 104th, as the Senate neared a vote on a balanced-budget constitutional amendment, Breaux briefly gave GOP leaders a scare when he canceled a news conference at which he was expected to announce he would support the amendment, as he had when the Senate voted on the matter in 1994. Breaux issued a statement saying he was working with fellow undecideds to "address the role of the federal courts in raising taxes and cutting programs under this amendment." Proponents subsequently agreed to include language in the amendment addressing the judicial intervention concern, and Breaux voted for the amendment again in March 1995. (He backed it again in 1997.)

Breaux also helped nudge Republicans toward the center on welfare overhaul in the 104th. Although he worked with Minority Leader Tom Daschle of South Dakota and Maryland Democrat Barbara A. Mikulski to craft the Democratic leadership's alternative welfare plan, Breaux was quick to note the need for compromise with Republicans. "We can't pass a bill without working with them," he said. "They cannot get a bill signed into law without working with us."

Initial efforts to overhaul welfare as part of a broader plan to balance the budget failed in 1995 when Clinton vetoed the GOP-backed bill, but Breaux quickly sought compromise when Republicans offered a new plan in 1996. He and John D. Rockefeller IV of West Virginia, voted for the bill on the Senate floor, with the understanding that Democrats would be included in conference discussions, as they were not the first time.

Despite his willingness to work with Republicans, Breaux takes pains not to offend his own party leaders, often negotiating on their behalf — or at least with their blessing. During the health care debate in the 103rd, then-Majority Leader George J. Mitchell of Maine kept in close touch with Breaux, who, along with Chafee, forged the Mainstream Group of Senate moderates. They tried to slow health cost increases through a tax cap limiting businesses' deductions. More than 20 senators embraced the Chafee-Breaux plan, but Mitchell still could not muster the 60 votes needed to stop a filibuster against a health care bill.

Late in 1988, Mitchell picked Breaux for the position that Mitchell himself had parlayed into his leadership victory: chairman of the fundraising Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC). The choice appeared to be an olive branch from Mitchell, who had won the majority leadership over Breaux's home-state colleague, Johnston.

Breaux was ideal for the DSCC job. While Republicans had spoken of using 1990 as a springboard for retaking Senate control in 1992, Democrats actually increased their majority by one seat in 1990, with Breaux raising record sums for his party's candidates.

During the 101st Congress, Breaux was awarded his coveted seat on the Finance Committee, where former Louisiana Democrat Russell B. Long wielded great institutional power as chairman for 14 years. In the 103rd, Breaux was appointed to a spot on the leadership team as chief deputy whip.

Breaux also served a stint as chairman of the Democratic Leadership Conference and, like other moderate-to-conservative Southerners in his party, he very much wants Democrats to have a more centrist image. Considering that, though, Breaux has voted the party line quite often. Notable departures include his stance on issues of gun control and abortion.

Breaux is unabashed about courting business. The quote about his vote being "rented" came in 1981, as he explained that he would support President Ronald Reagan's proposed social spending cuts in return for concessions on natural gas policy and sugar subsidies.

Above all, Breaux is an advocate for Louisiana's interests, especially energy and commercial fishing. In 1990, he helped secure funding to help Louisiana address its coastal erosion problems, a concern not only of environmentalists but also of business. Late in the 101st, during consideration of a deficit-reduction package, Breaux persuaded his Finance colleagues to include a $50 million "wetlands preservation" trust fund, with about $35 million going to Louisiana.

Still, true to his pragmatist style, Breaux is willing to compromise even on some matters that may affect his constituents negatively. In the 104th, Breaux resisted GOP efforts to slash the subsidies for rice, a key farm commodity in Louisiana, as lawmakers debated changes to the nation's farm law. The final bill, though more friendly to rice farmers than at the outset of the debate — thanks to the work of Breaux and other Southerners — left some rice producers skeptical. Still, Breaux voted for the legislation.

And despite a dedication to nuclear power and the petrochemical industry, Breaux also has to balance the safety and environmental concerns of Louisianans. When Environment Committee members offered their first rewrite of the Clean Air Act in April 1989, Breaux was considered a pivotal backer. "Those of us in Louisiana want not only jobs, we want to be able to breathe the air and breathe it safely," he said.

At Home: Breaux learned his trade from one of Louisiana's masters — former Gov. Edwards, who served four terms and was once a member of the House. Breaux was Edwards' junior law partner and

served for four years as one of his top congressional aides.

When Edwards first won the governorship in February 1972, he pushed for Breaux to be his successor in the House. With Edwards' organization, Breaux easily paced the field of six Democratic primary candidates, then won the September runoff with 55 percent over TV newscaster Gary Tyler, whom Edwards had defeated to win his first House term seven years earlier.

Breaux does not, however, owe his ascent to the Senate to Edwards' influence. If anything, his one-time mentor made his 1986 bid to replace retiring Democrat Long more difficult. During Edwards' third term, Louisiana's oil industry had foundered, and by the time of the 1986 Senate contest the state's economy was reeling. Many voters were in a mood to blame Democrats. Moreover, Edwards' image had suffered during two trials on corruption charges, even though he was eventually acquitted.

Those circumstances gave the GOP one of its best openings in years. Early in 1986, GOP Rep. W. Henson Moore began airing ads designed to exploit voters' restlessness. Democrats, Moore charged, had squandered the state's resources and prostituted the political system to their own advantage. Republicans, Moore argued, were the party of reform.

If Moore had continued on the same tack, he might have won. But as the all-party September primary approached, he pushed to win more than 50 percent of the vote and avoid a runoff. He shifted his emphasis, beginning a wave of ads and mailings that attacked Breaux directly. "The politician's politician, always putting himself first," one mailer called the Democrat. At the same time, the national GOP mounted a program to purge ineligible voters in black precincts.

None of those tactics sat well with Louisiana's basically Democratic electorate. Moore seemed mean-spirited, especially in contrast with Breaux's Cajun charm. And the "ballot security" program infuriated black voters — a boost for Breaux, since many blacks had considered him too conservative.

The primary was a turning point. Moore came in first, but he did not run as strongly as many had expected. Over the next month, Breaux worked to take the high ground Moore had abandoned, arguing that the state's problems stemmed not from the state government, but from a GOP administration that had followed misguided trade and farm policies. Moore's first allegiance, he charged, was to his party and to President Reagan, not to Louisiana. Breaux won 42 of 64 parishes, taking 53 percent overall.

Six years later, the state GOP was in disarray, coming off a disastrous election year in 1991 that was marked by the defeat of both its endorsed gubernatorial candidate (Rep. Clyde C. Holloway) and the incumbent governor, Democrat-turned-Republican Buddy Roemer, and the embarrassment of having Republican David Duke, a former Ku Klux Klan leader and former Nazi sympathizer, make the gubernatorial runoff against Edwards.

With Breaux's popularity at seemingly unassailable heights, no prominent Republican stepped forward. Breaux won re-election in the five-way primary with 73 percent.

SENATE ELECTIONS

1992 Primary †

John B. Breaux (D)	616,021	(73%)
Jon Khachaturian (I)	74,785	(9%)
Lyle Stockstill (R)	69,986	(8%)
Nick Joseph Accardo (D)	45,839	(5%)
Fred Clegg Strong (R)	36,406	(4%)

Previous Winning Percentages: **1986** (53%) **1984*** (86%) **1982*** (79%) **1980*** (100%) **1978*** (60%) **1976*** (83%) **1974*** (89%) **1972*** (100%)

** House election*

† In Louisiana the primary is open to candidates of all parties. If a candidate wins 50 percent or more of the vote in the primary, no general election is held. A candidate unopposed in the primary and general election is declared elected and the candidate's name does not appear on the ballot.

CAMPAIGN FINANCE

	Receipts	Receipts from PACs	Expenditures
1992			
Breaux (D)	$2,449,803	$1,318,635 (54%)	$1,446,199

KEY VOTES

1997	
Approve balanced-budget constitutional amendment	Y
Approve chemical weapons treaty	Y
1996	
Approve farm bill	Y
Limit punitive damages in product liability cases	N
Exempt small businesses from higher minimum wage	N
Approve welfare overhaul	Y
Bar job discrimination based on sexual orientation	Y
Override veto of ban on "partial birth" abortions	Y
1995	
Approve GOP budget with tax and spending cuts	N
Approve constitutional amendment barring flag desecration	Y

VOTING STUDIES

	Presidential Support		Party Unity		Conservative Coalition	
Year	**S**	**O**	**S**	**O**	**S**	**O**
1996	76	22	69	29	82	16
1995	76	23	73	26	93	5
1994	81	15	74	21	78	22
1993	84	13	78	20	80	17
1992	42	58	68	29	76	21
1991	65	33	59	37	83	13

INTEREST GROUP RATINGS

Year	ADA	AFL-CIO	CCUS	ACU
1996	60	n/a	62	20
1995	70	75	56	22
1994	55	63	44	17
1993	40	82	27	24
1992	60	67	10	30
1991	30	67	40	57